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Stereotypes and Prejudice in the Perception of the “Other”

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Abstract

This paper aims to approach the delicate issues of stereotypes and prejudices in perceiving the otherness starting from the definition and the structure of otherness, continuing with the inventory of the features of stereotypes and prejudices as they occur in sociological and psychological theories and with the criticism of such theories and paying special attention to the way in which stereotypes and prejudices occur in inter-groups and inter-ethnic relationships. Conclusions show the functions of approaching otherness and bivalent effects (premises of exclusion and recognition of the other) of such approach.

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1. Introduction

The concept of otherness is as complex as vague. The study of otherness enters a wide intellectual spectrum. We can approach the otherness issue starting from interpretation systems that are exterior to it (inter-group relations, prejudices, categorizations, stereotypes, social identity, etc.), or we can present it as an abstract entity – object of a social – cognitive treatment, discursive and/or behavioral, leading, in the end, towards a plurality of presentations with another one that does not incorporate in a synthetic vision. In this paper we will circumscribe otherness as referring to the characteristics attributed to a social character, an individual or a group, which enables us focus on studying both the attribution process and its result, taking into consideration the contexts of use, the actors and the types of their interaction.

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2. Aspects and modalities of relating to „otherness”

Gavriliuță (2009) identifies some aspects of otherness, among which internal otherness, which refers to two dimensions: the hidden part from within us and the minority (ethnic, sexual, religious or professional) from a social community. According to Augé (1987) there are two forms of otherness. The first form (distinctness from “others” within a common set) is an otherness of internal use, and the second one is an otherness of external use, which is characterized by its radicality (it is about excluding, even eliminating „others” from the common set). The treatment of otherness is nothing but an indirect and negative way to think of oneself as identical.

We can notice that the ways to relate to otherness are based on noticing differences from a certain identity. Otherness cannot be defined but by using with a pair term, identity. This articulation is the result of the categorization process tributary to each culture, in essence being the opposition between identical and different. The relation between me – the other one can be illustrated through a series of antagonistic pairs, of which we mention some: similar - different; local-foreign; close-far; friend-enemy; normal-deviant; majority-minority. According to Augé, the individual is the reunion of heterogeneous elements. When all these otherness aspects are addressed, we can consider the identity is defined. Therefore, identity is about addressing otherness. During the process of interpersonal communication, people identify the individuals as belonging to certain social categories. Subsequently, the means of mass communication permanently construct and reconstruct representations that refer to these identities.

Tajfel (1981) ascertains that the mere fact of categorizing objects into distinct groups modifies the way in which they are perceived. Discovering otherness may be done by comparison with our own culture, with the set of values and norms considered by us as being normal, set that often serves as unconscious reference framework in order to manage the daily activities. Revealing the characteristics of the “other”, of “otherness”, is performed by an explicit or implicit counterweight of the self-image, of the own individual, local, regional or national, even racial characteristics.

In the theory proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1999), the concept of otherness is a social construct, being subject to the forces implied in the sociology of knowledge. For the two authors the daily life reality is a construed reality, a reality interpreted by people, which for them has got subjective meaning and shows them a coherent world. This world is not only a given thing, but also appears from their thoughts and actions, being maintained as real by them. The other can be perceived either directly, by face-to-face interactions, or indirectly, by typical schemata. Daily life reality contains these standardizations, based on which the others are perceived and treated, shaping as a result the interactions with the other. The authors mention the fact that the standardized schemata are reciprocal, the other also perceiving us in a typical way, the two schemes entering a continuous „negotiation” in the face to face situation. The experience with the others is made “face-to-face” and this is the prototype of social interaction, and most of the times the contact with the others are typical in both directions (I see the other as a type and I interact with him in a typical situation).

The directions of the otherness will be shaped by the social forces, suggests Hazell (2009), forces that, by different means, win and maintain their legitimacy in a discursive universe. A person will coin the image of otherness through the prism of the relations he has with the “other”, relations that will influence him in understanding and behaving towards “the other”.

3. Stereotypes in the perception of otherness

Banaji (2001) shows that the concept of stereotype refers to beliefs, knowledge, expectations of social groups and it has been theorized about as the cognitive partner in the stereotype-prejudice duo since the 1920s and empirically investigated since the 1930s.

Yzerbyt and Schadron (2001) support the assumption that Walter Lippmann is the one who introduced the stereotype concept in social sciences, by launching the phrase “images in our head” in his famous work *Public Opinion* from 1922, the mental images being an equivalent of the stereotype notion, notion assumed subsequently by the field of social psychology. Without giving them an exact definition, Lippmann considers them the result of a universal tendency to re-group events, groups and situations based on some similarities. Referring to the way in which reality is filtered by images and pre-existent cultural representations, Lippmann spoke about mental images as helping people understand an environment (the more complex, the more relative) for the direct knowledge of

persons and events. The author addresses stereotypes as cognitive structures which help people process information about the outer world. These structures are inevitable, due to human being's limits in knowing and handling information, the stereotypes being seen as "maps of the world", having the role of clarifying people's social itinerary (Leyens, Yzerbyt, Schadron, 1996).

Attempting a synthesis, Miller (1982) notices the diversity and the increased number of stereotypes' definitions, as many as the authors who expressed them. Fiske (1988), Hogg and Vaughan (2010) list the main characteristics of stereotypes highlighted by most social-psychology studies a century after the time the concept was introduced and used. They mention five main characteristics of stereotypes: a) stereotypes are simplified images of members of a group, based most often on the clearly visible differences between the groups (for instance, the physical aspect), often being pejorative when applied to the *out-group*; b) stereotypes are adaptive cognitive shortcuts that enable quick impressions about people, by which large groups of people are easily described using little characteristics; also, stereotypes serve to give a meaning to some particular relations between groups; c) stereotypes are stable because of their function of cognitive adaptation, and what we see when we notice their change is the result of adapting to the great economic, political or social changes; however, the stereotypes of a group can vary from a context to another as they are selected to fit the situational requirements and own goals and motives of the person who uses them; d) stereotypes are acquired, some of them at a young age, and others crystallize in childhood; e) stereotypes become more acute and more hostile when social tensions and conflicts appear between the groups, and when they are extremely difficult to change. Bigler (2006) proposes a new theory of the formation of social stereotypes and prejudice among children, called „developmental intergroup theory”. The authors named above mention that, usually, these images are shared by the members of the same group (*in-group*) and/or by the members of another group (*out-group*).

Stereotype has got a prevailing negative character, being defined as a negative generalization used by the *in-group* (us) regarding the *out-group* (them).

The many definitions of stereotypes underline automatism, the inevitability of their occurrence in thought as clichés, common places, received ideas. Stereotype is both unavoidable and appealable, appearing as a bivalent and reversible notion. It is an obstacle to knowledge as it schematizes and deforms, imposes abusive generalizations and premade ideas, generating fortuitous prejudice. In exchange, it proves indispensable for knowledge and social life at the extent to which it is categorization and is conducive to cultural models and collective images of the real and of the „other”, without which community existence and identity are not possible.

As a judgment, apparently a value judgment, stereotype automatically is reproductive. Being a positive or negative value judgment, crystallized as a belief (Gavreliuc, 2006), stereotype is the result of the cognitive process of social categorization, its function being to simplify and systematize received stimuli in order to ease cognitive and behavioral adaptation in a new situation of communication. It is a shortcut in perception (Șerbănescu, 2007) and, by its agency, we are including unknown persons into a priori constituted categories, by extending certain generalized group attributes unto each group members. Thus it plays the part of regulating efficiently social interactions.

Regularly, the use of a given stereotype conduces to the consideration that all members of a category, like an ethnic group, share the attributes contained in the stereotype.

For instance, McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears (2002) define stereotypes as psychological representations of characteristics of people belonging to particular groups, representations that involve three characteristics, which are: a) they are shared group beliefs which are coined by the opinions or norms accepted by the social groups the perceiving person belongs to; b) they are energy-savers, reducing the effort of the perceiver; c) they are meaningful, helping the observer give a meaning to the situation. According to authors, stereotypes are constructs that reflect sets of associated normative beliefs, beliefs being intrinsically linked to stereotypes.

Macrae, Stangor and Hewstone (1996) describe stereotypes as representations about the world that influence the selection of information about members of the social groups and their social behavior. As for the information on social groups the way it is represented in the memory, authors identify three types of approaches. These are: a) group schemata, their contents being formed by abstract structures of specific knowledge, defining characteristics and relevant attributes of a given concept; once developed in memory, they influence positively persons' perception, judgments and behaviors to others; b) group prototype, which is a mental representation consisting in a collection of associations, group labels and characteristics supposedly true; c) types, that is categorizations of objects depending

on memory-stored instances; in addition, to abstract representations of social groups, people have memories for specific individuals (types) they previously met.

Ethnic-based stereotypes are called ethnic stereotypes.

Marger (2011) tell ethnic stereotypes from rational generalizations as they are simplistic overstated beliefs regarding a group, generally acquired passively and resilient to change. In social interaction, fixing ethnical categories is often conducive to mental simplifications, to blurring individual differences between group members. As stereotypes are group descriptions, persons to whom stereotypes apply are not seen as individuals per se, but as representatives of the group they belong to. The characteristics attributed to various ethnic groups are established in popular beliefs and become part of our common understanding about who are “we” and who are “they”.

Stereotypes have a strong impact over social interaction; they structure and perpetuate relations between groups.

4. Prejudice in perceiving otherness

With regard to prejudice, Allport (1954) defined prejudice as “predispositions” to adopt a negative behavior toward a group, predispositions based on erroneous generalizations with no consideration to individual differences. It is he who tackles the subject of the relationships between individual and *in-group*, respectively *out-group* and concomitantly tackles the issue of measuring the social distance determined by these prejudices.

Leyens (2001) mentions that prejudice corresponds to cognitive beliefs, affects, and discriminatory behaviors towards members of a group on account of their membership to this group. Capozza and Volpato (1996) sustain that stereotype is their cognitive component. Frequently prejudices refer to negative feelings associated to a particular group (Ruscher, 2001). Marx and Ko (2012) mention the primary concepts, history, current trends, and overview of research related to discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice.

Marger (2011) delimits four characteristics of prejudice, that is: a) they are categorical or generalized thoughts; individuals are judged considering their belonging to the group and not their personal attributes; once the group is known, their behavioral characteristics are inferred; b) are inflexible; the individual develops emotional attachments to certain beliefs and does not give up on them when confronted with conflicting evidence; c) they are usually negative; specific features of the target group are considered inferior and socially undesirable. They can be both positive and negative. The members of the ethnic group maintain an extremely favorable image about their own group, as they maintain extremely unfavorable images about *out-groups*; d) they are based on erroneous or inadequate group images (stereotypes), as they make up the main content of ethnical prejudice.

In his study on prejudice, Van Dijk (1984) identifies two great traditions of prejudice analysis. The first orientation is seen in Europe and outlines the social dimension of intergroup relationships and prejudices. The researches of this orientation sustain that the roots of prejudice should be looked for in intergroup relations and conflicts, in the social function of prejudice, in the fundamental differentiation of *in-groups* and *out-groups*, and in the influence of such group distinctions on the processing of social information. The second study tradition prevails in US, orientation that outlines the cognitive dimensions of stereotyping, the processing of social information and group perception.

Andersen and Taylor (2008) identify the main theories used in approaching prejudice. According to authors, these theories may be grouped in psychological theories and sociological theories. Amongst psychological theories about prejudice, it is worthwhile mentioning: a) the theory of the scapegoat, according to which the ethnic minority is seen as a substitute for the release of cumulated frustration coming from the strive of cumulating economic and social success, this release manifesting as aggression. The psychological principle according to which the aggression often follows frustration lays at the basis of this theory; b) the theory of the authoritarian, characterized by a bias to classify rigidly other persons and to submit rigidly to authority, to be intolerant to ambiguity and to be superstitious. The authoritarian is more likely to classify stereotypically or rigidly another person.

Amongst sociological theories, it is worth mentioning: a) functionalist theory, that considers ethnic relationships should be functional for the society and thus contribute to the harmonious life and stability of such society; ethnic minorities should be assimilated into the greater society, to be socially, economically and culturally absorbed in the dominant society; b) symbolic interactionism, which approaches two types of issues: the part played by social interaction in reducing ethnic hostility and the way ethnicity is construed socially; c) conflict theory, which based on class, is an inherent and fundamental part of social interaction.

Without going into too much detail, we believe that the social identity theory has great explanatory power over ethnic prejudices and insists over the fact that the positive aspects of social identity of members of a group only acquire meaning in relation to differences with the other groups. According to this perspective (Turliuc, 2004), individuals tend to maintain or increase their self esteem, their group evaluations are made by comparison to other groups, the social identity can be positive or negative depending on these evaluations, individuals tend to maintain a positive social identity and when the social identity is unsatisfactory individuals tend to leave the group to join a more attractive group. According to this approach people favor *in-grouping* because of the need to have a high self-esteem and a positive social identity.

In direct correlation with this theory, we consider that the reference group theory can be found. According to this theory, individuals have prejudices in the context in which they perceive as being the norm of the reference group or the group that they are part of, the manifestation of negative, hostile attitudes towards other certain groups. Thus, they see prejudice as a way to accommodate to the norms of the group and not necessarily as an internal psychological need. According to this theory, it is possible to reduce the prejudice of a person by redefining individual's identity, seen as belonging to specific groups.

5. Conclusions

Otherness does not uniquely means an inventory of negative traits, premises of exclusion and discrimination; it also involves the recognition of the other and the acceptance of its traits. During interpersonal communication, people identify their fellow human beings as belonging to specific social categories, which make up the building blocks of otherness. Representations of otherness are then constructed and reconstructed permanently by communication means. Addressing otherness signifies, above all, questions on how to understand the other, how to discover it in a meaning-loaded world by procedures of comparison, observation, interpretation, etc. Our endeavor about the *other* is never completed and it is conducted by constructing meaning networks and using cognitive and affective strategies.

Stereotypes and prejudices are correlative and can be understood only in a reciprocal relationship. They may, in some cases, prevent community collaboration and development.

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